

MARTIN WONG

excerpts from
Footprints, Poems, and Leaves

Martin Wong is an eternal revelation. He captured his peers, of whom he was in many ways an outsider, with grace and humanity. Rather than seeking shame and erasure in our faults, struggles, and differences, Wong found transcendence in the thing itself. Given both the vitriolic world and minds we inhabit, not to mention the harsh realities of the graffiti subculture, this was no easy task. He could capture the beauty not only in a city literally on fire, but also in our scarred and fragile souls as well. He was a painter who made prison cells levitate and brick walls drift like constellations in the night sky. Even before finding his community in the Lower East Side, Wong's time in the remote working-class city of Eureka, CA was marked by that same capacity for empathy. It seems that no one was left unscathed by his affectionate vision. I wonder if it was precisely because he didn't fit in that he gave so much love and attention to society's outsiders. He was one of the rare artists who truly saw and listened to the people, places, and histories around him.

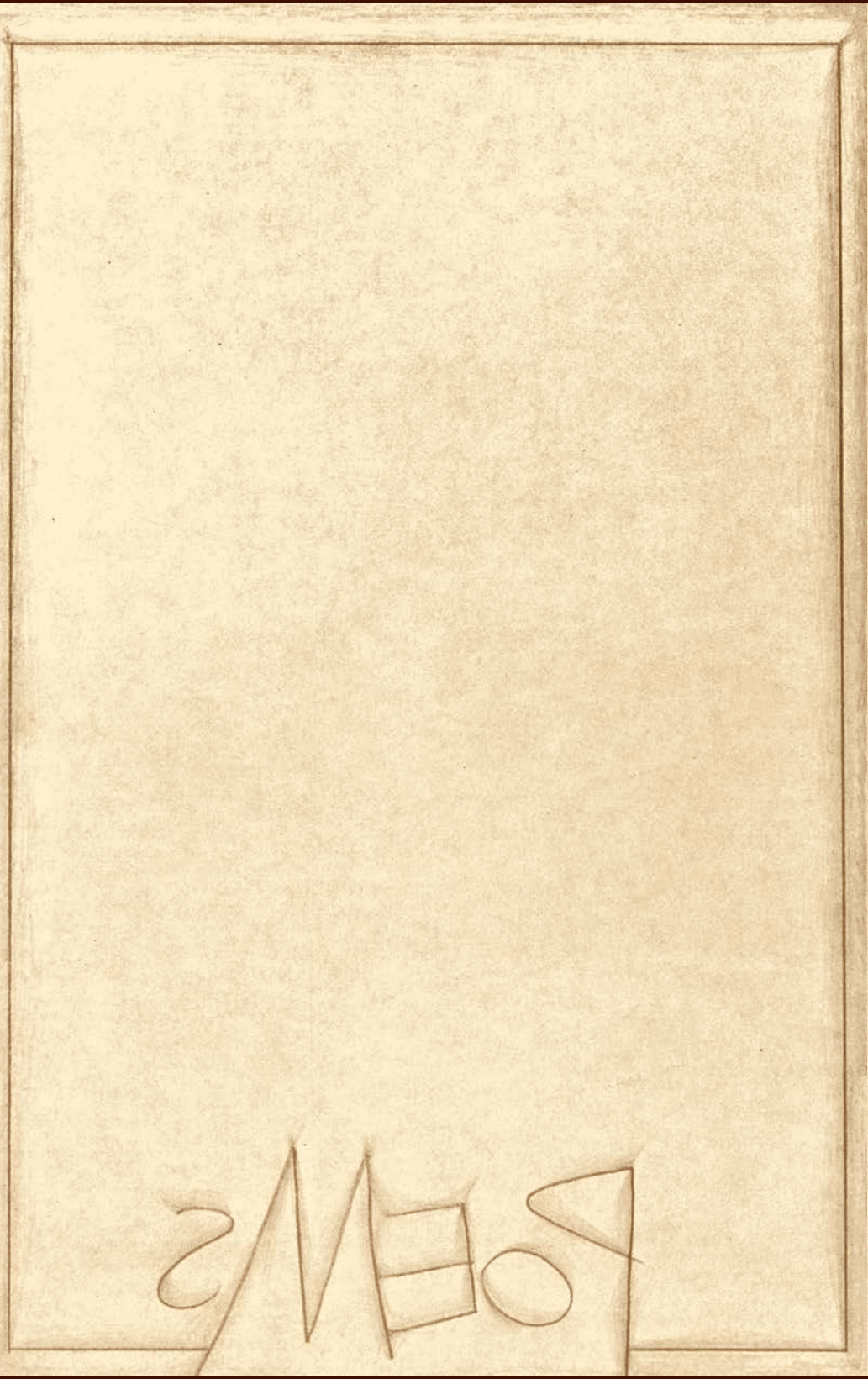
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Primary Information

If his paintings bore witness to the scenes around him, his writings are, in a way, acts of bearing witness to himself. Self published in 1968, *Footprints, Poems, and Leaves*, is a collection of poems Wong wrote between 1966 and 1968 in San Francisco. This was long before his career as a self-taught painter in NYC, which began in 1978. Written in Wong's signature calligraphic script, which feels prescient of historic West Coast handstyles, these poems are both early clues and an intimate glance into the depth and vision of an artist whose message is forever important, everyday more than before. I've lost count of how many times I've cried seeing and thinking about his paintings. These poems are a similarly generous act, offering an inward contemplation of the artist who would later turn his gaze upon the universe of Downtown New York City. "JAN 25, MOONLIGHT THRU THE DUSTY GLASS, SHADOWS ON THE WALL, AN EMPTY ROOM, SOME SCATTERED LEAVES, + A STORY LEFT UNTOLD."

– **David Ai Wang**



POEMS



POEMS

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

MORNING UNFOLDING
COLD & CLEAN
FROTH OUT OF THE VOID
FERN TREMBLING GREEN
THRU FOAM SHROUDED RED WOODS
SMELL OF THE SEA
DOG SNIFFS THE GROUND
THEN TAKES A TREE

ALONE BENEATH A LAZY SHADE TREE
TOYS LEFT SCATTERED IN THE GRASS
BY KIDS GONE TO PLAY IN THE WOODS
DOG ATTACKS THE SILENCE

BEYOND THE RAILINGS
ONLY A SILENCE OF WEARISOME TREES
IN OTHER COURTYARDS
THE RUSTLING OF LEAVES
A DOOR SLAMS SHUT

JULY 14

RING OF DARK LIQUID
NIGHT IN THE WIND
FOOT CRYSTALS OF RAIN
AS THE TREES GOSPEL IN
DEEP IN THE FOREST
NOT A WIND NOT A WHISPER
NOT A SOUND STIRS THESE
BRANCHES
ALONE BENEATH A RED WOOD
TREE
NO ONE COMES
TO BOTHER ME.

JULY 16
1967

HAWK:
SMELL OF RED WOOD
BLACK & SILVER
HAWK
EYES BURNED GEAR
NIGHT WITHOUT FEAR
ARRAQUANT & ALONE.

JULY 25
1967

UPON THE HILL OLD HOUSE MOULDERS IN SWEET VELVET DECAY.
BEHIND DUST STAINED WINDOWS KIDS LAY SPRAWLED OUT ON
THE FLOOR READING THEIR VIOLENT LOVE DEATH COMICS IN A
CASCADING SWAMP OF BOOKS. BOOKS MADE OF THE WINGS OF
MOTHS. BOOKS WRITTEN ON HUMAN SKIN INDIAN BARK.
A HISTORY OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE WRITTEN ON A COBWEB.
STRANGE BOOKS IN UNKNOWN LANGUAGES & BOOKS WITHOUT
ANY WORDS AT ALL. BOOKS THAT UNFOLD IN SOFT LAYERS OF
FILM & ELECTRICAL CURRENT, SAY "FEEL ME" THEN FLAKE TO
THE TOUCH IN SHIMMERING WISPS OF UNEARTHLY MUSIC.
& UPON THESE DARK & HOLY PAGES THEY SCRAWL THEIR
RHYMES & DIRTY PICTURES.

DECEMBER 7: 35.8 HASTE
BERKELEY

AUTUMN AFTERNOON
HOUSE SPILLED OPEN LIKE A WOUND
SINKS & DOOR KNOBS
ALL GOT TOOK
EVERYTHING WORTH ANYTHING
RIPTED FROM THE ROOMS
SO NOTHING LEFT NOW
BUT THE MEMORIES
A FEW CRUMPLED PENS
& SOME HUNGRY FLEAS.

IN THIS NIGHT SO OVERGROWN
ONLY THE SOUND OF MOONLIGHT
FALLING ON PAVING STONES
THE RAIN HAS STOPPED
TIME GROWS LATE
BEHIND MOSS COVERED WALLS
THE GARDEN WALLS.

GLASS SPLINTERS & USED BICYCLE PARTS
CAT SHIT & CHICKEN FEATHERS:
IN SECRET ROOMS WHERE
WE PASSED THE SUMMER
PENS PAINTED IN LAYERS
ONE ON ANOTHER
WEAVING A WHIRLPOOL OF CORNERS
NOW SWIRLING OPEN IN A GIANT
AS THE WRECKERS DESCEND
THE OLD HOUSE ERUPTS
RAINING DOWN THRU A
SMOKEY BREEZE
SHREDS A BEAUTY INTO
AUTUMN LEAVES.

DEC 8 1967

TEN YEARS FROM THE EDGE
A SHIT SECOND FROM FATE
YOU PLOT + YOU PLAN
+ THEN IT'S TOO LATE
+ ALL THAT SAVES YOU IN
THE END
AIN'T BRAINS OR FRIENDS
BUT YOUR OWN BLIND LUCK
JAN 23

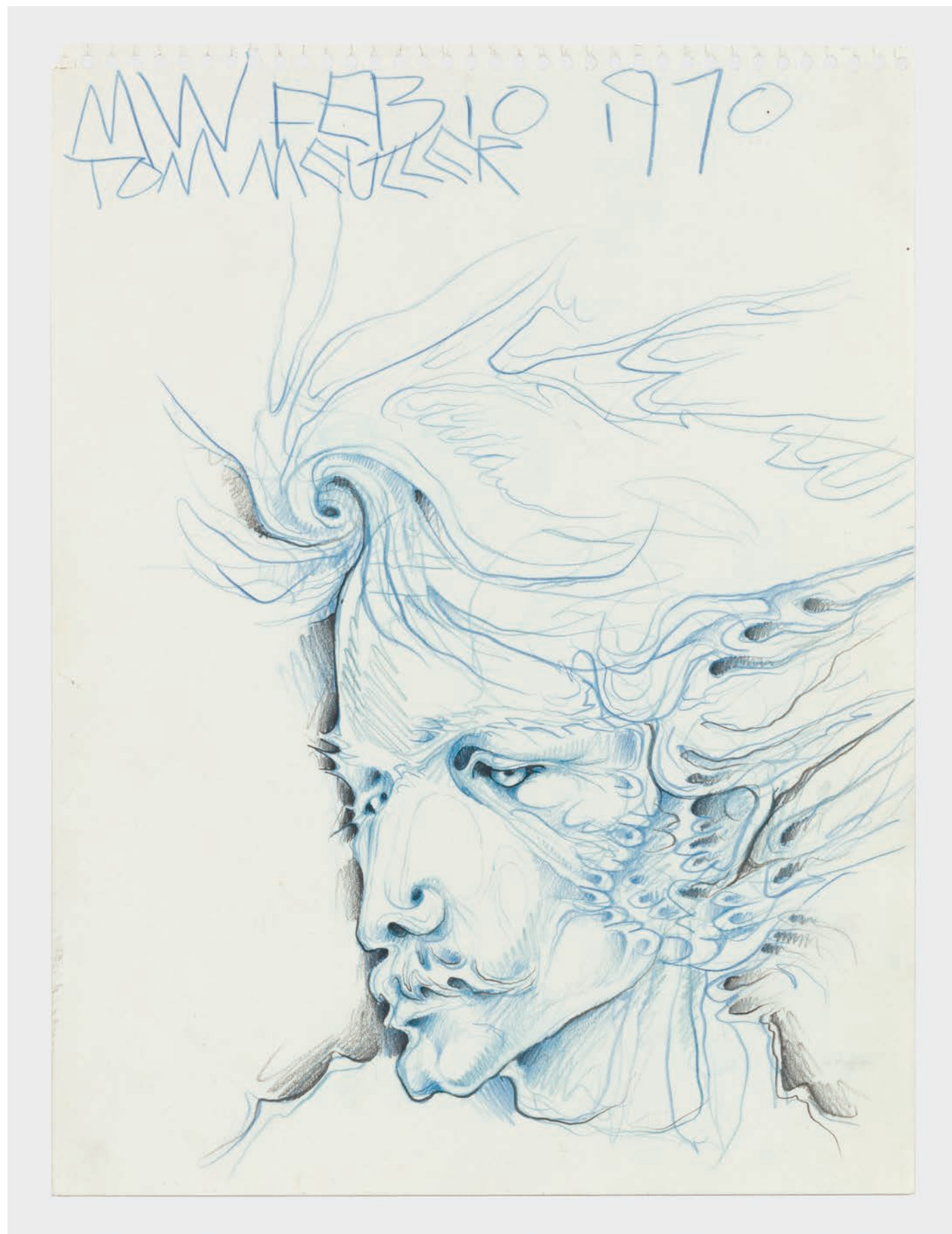
MOONLIGHT THRU THE DUSTY
GLASS
SHADOWS ON THE WALL
AN EMPTY ROOM
SOME SCATTERED LEAVES
+ A STORY LEFT UNTOLD

MOON DROP PELETS
PUNKIN ON THE TIN ROOF
RUNNIN DOWN THE RAINBUT
LISTENING TO THE MUSIC
THINKING OF YOU
JAN 27

NEW YORK LAS VEGAS THE GLITTER & GLARE

MONEY PLAYS GAMES WITH ITSELF
IN A BINDING SUCCESSION OF
NUMBERS NUMBER NUMBERS
AS COMMUTERS GO HOVERING BY
IN THEIR OWN SELF-CONTAINED TIME
CAPSULES HERMETICALLY SEALED
SAFE WITHIN FROM THE SOUNDS
AND SMELLS OF THE CITY SPEEDING
PAST. THE BREATHLESS SURGE
OF CONSTANT ACCELERATION: SLEEK
ENGINES OF BEAUTY & DEATH.
GLEAMING APPLIANCES DISCARDED
LIKE TOYS BY BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN
WHO NEVER GROW OLD OR AT LEAST
NEVER ADMIT TO IT. DISPOSABLE
BEAUTY IN ALL ITS FORMS: QUICK
FROZEN IMAGES FLASHED BEYOND
THE OUTER LIMITS OF TIME-SPACE:

A SEX GODDESS OUTLIVED BY HER
SMILE, A SMILE OUTLIVED BY ITS
SHADOW. SLEEPWALKERS IN BEARDS.
SLEEPWALKERS IN SUITS. & THEY ALL
ILLUSIONISTS ALL OF THEM, WHETHER
IT'S THE TRANSIENT PARADISE OF
DOPE, OR THE QUIET NIRVANA OF
TRANQUILIZERS & TELEVISION.
IN A PLASTIC GARDEN NOTHING
EVER DIES. THE SNAIL HE'S AN
ARTIST, REELING OFF A LONG SLIMY
TRAIL OF MAGIC LUMINESCENCE
ACROSS THE PARKING LOT DESERT
& YOU FOLLOW THAT TRAIL READING
THE BEAUTY & THE LIGHT STRUNG
OUT BEFORE YOU TIL AT LAST YOU REACH
THE DRIED OUT HUSK AT THE END.
BUT STILL THE VISION OF THAT TRAIL
LINGERS GLITTERING BEHIND.



Martin Wong "Tom Meuller," 1970. Graphite and blue colored pencil on paper. 12 x 9 in. / 30.48 x 22.86 cm.



Martin Wong "Love Letter Incinerator - (\$)," 1970. Ceramic. 10 1/4 x 7 x 11 in. / 26.4 x 17.78 x 27.94 cm.



Martin Wong "Untitled (MW Was Here April 1970)," 1970. Stoneware. 22 x 12 x 7 in. / 55.88 x 30.48 x 17.78 cm.



Martin Wong "Self portrait," c. 1970. Pencil on paper. 11 1/2 x 9 x 1/2 in. / 29.21 x 22.86 x 1.27 cm.



Martin Wong "My Secret World, 1978-81," 1984. Acrylic on canvas. 48 x 68 in. / 121.9 x 172.7 cm.